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Assassination and Obsession

From Lincoln to JFK, the Murders on Our Minds

By Michael R. Beschloss

DECADES AFTER the president's murder, someone advanced the theory that he was killed by conspirators in the U.S. military complex who were alarmed that their commander-in-chief was going soft on the adversary. The popular treatment of this notion became a national sensation. When journalists and academics denounced it, the author bitterly branded them tools of an Establishment coverup.

This refers not to Oliver Stone, but to a Chicago chemist-businessman named Otto Eisen-schimi, who in 1937 published a book called "Why Was Lincoln Murdered?" Chosen by the Book-of-the-Month Club, it argued that Secretary of War Edwin Stanton orchestrated Lincoln's murder in order to prolong the U.S. government's militance toward the defeated South and benefit Stanton's own constituency.

In the wake of John F. Kennedy's assassination, distraught Americans strained to find superficial similarities between the 35th president and the 16th (for example, each was

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elected in the 61st year of his century, each fought for civil rights and was succeeded by a Southerner named Johnson). As with Lincoln, once the immediate trauma of Kennedy's death began to fade, a cottage industry sprang up, producing literally hundreds of mutually contradictory books lambasting the official version of the crime. It has come to seem that the most lasting parallel between the two leaders may turn out to be the degree to which their deaths continue to haunt the American imagination.

A historian would like to think that the continuing national obsession with the Kennedy assassination is an expression of healthy curiosity about lingering historical questions. But Americans do not seem to be quite so aroused about such less dramatic issues as why Harry Truman fired Douglas MacArthur or whether Dwight Eisenhower should have authorized the Interstate Highway System. Neither of these subjects would have caught the eye of Oliver Stone and his investors.

Why does the interest in Dallas remain so intense? One reason is trivial. Some Americans treat the subject as a parlor game, with the same curiosity that causes some people to steep themselves in the lore of such mysteries

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as the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby or the disappearance of Amelia Earhart.

For them, the Kennedy assassination seems to offer an Agatha Christie-like range of possible suspects and culprits—the Mob, the CIA, the Pentagon, pro-Castro Cubans, anti-Castro Cubans, right-wing fanatics, the Soviets. It is safe to presume that the many tourists who visit the depot by unofficial Assassination Information Center in Dallas (open 24 hours a day, with the Zapuder film of the crime played on continuous loop) go there less for historical

treasures and ultimate U.S. military defeat all striped Americans of their deities and their confidence in national institutions.

It is difficult to bear the thought that our lives could be so altered by the whim of a 24-year-old crackpot. Moreover, there is arguably more evidence of a grand conspiracy behind Kennedy's murder than behind the deaths of Taylor, Lincoln or Roosevelt. One need only read through Kennedy's FBI file (now in the FBI archives) to see how many groups issued threats against his life. Cubans angry at his efforts to unhorse Castro, Cuban exiles angry that the effort were not vigorous enough; gangsters, who resented their harassment by the Justice Department; muggles of the radical right who complained to one another that he was handing the country to the pope, the blacks, the Jews and the communists. As we have learned since 1963, these groups, as well as FBI, Pentagon and intelligence figures who loathed the president, had a startling variety of disturbing connections to Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby.

more profound reason runs back to Eisenhower. Many Americans remain obsessed with Lincoln's assassination because they view it as a decisive moment in American history. They believe that had Lincoln lived, the South might have been more graciously restored to the Union. For Eisenhower, Lincoln's death had to be the work not of one angry Shakespearean actor and a few co-conspirators but a plot so momentous that it had to be engineered by Lincoln's own war secretary.

Other conspiracy theorists have long pointed to the sudden death in 1850 of Zachary Taylor, after gorging himself on cucumbers, cherries and cold milk, and how his successor, Millard Fillmore, reversed Taylor's efforts to relieve the harshness of the slavery issue and avert a Civil War. Could such a peculiar demise with such grand consequences be accidental? Last June, they succeeded in having Taylor's coffin pried open and his corpse examined for signs that he was poisoned by pro-slavery conspirators. (They found none.)

Joseph Stalin, another who doubted that history happens by accident, insisted that had his World War II ally Franklin Roosevelt lived beyond 1945, the Cold War would never have erupted. Stalin was certain that Roosevelt was poisoned by Soviet-hating members of his own administration. Many Americans in 1992, perhaps a majority, believe that Kennedy's death was another moment in our history from which we have never recovered. By this argument, the shock of the assassination, the frustration of Lyndon Johnson, the large-scale plunge into Vietnam, the official de-

fection and ultimate U.S. military defeat all striped Americans of their deities and their confidence in national institutions.

It has increased their eagerness to find invisible currents behind the Kennedy assassination, especially because so many key elements of the Kennedy administration (as opposed to, for instance, the Truman or Eisenhower regimes) were secret in 1963 and only revealed later in headlines—the president's relations with Judith Campbell Exner and her ties to the Mafia; the plotting by the CIA and the Mob against Castro; Kennedy's secret arrangements with Khrushchev to end the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and his secret dialogue with the Cuban dictator. So many pots boiling at the time of Dallas have made it all the more difficult to believe that the president was killed by a lone nut. Nevertheless, for all the evidence that hints at a conspiracy, there is no explanation yet available that connects all the dots.



John F. Kennedy, 1963. Photo by the White House.

Nor can we be certain that Kennedy's death actually did change the course of history. The view that the president was determined to withdraw from Vietnam is so widely accepted that a 1990 made-for-television movie had a time traveler go back to 1963 Dallas in an attempt to save Kennedy and spare the nation its ruinous adventure in Southeast Asia. (When he fails, he warns the newly-installed LBJ about what awaits him. Johnson responds by sending a million U.S. troops to Southeast Asia and using nuclear weapons against Hanoi.)

In fact, one can present a strong case for the argument that had Kennedy been re-elected in 1964, he would have made the same decision on Vietnam that Johnson did. The men who advised Johnson to escalate the war—Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Maxwell Taylor and others—were all Kennedy appointees whose unanimous advice he would have had to overrule. The evidence of Kennedy's own intentions in the fall of 1963 is ambiguous.

His partisans recall Kennedy saying that he would not mind being denounced as soft on communism in 1966 because by then he would not have to worry about reelection. But such a damn-the-consequence speech is absent from every other major decision of Kennedy's public career. It is at

least as plausible to imagine him in 1965 worried that forsaking the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam would jeopardize congressional willingness to pass his ambitious second-term domestic program, his place in history and possibly the chances of Robert and Edward Kennedy to win high national office after he left the White House.

One might even go further and argue that after his 1964 reelection, Kennedy would have followed his instincts and been much more cautious than Johnson proved to be in fighting for the blacks and the poor, and that hence the national disillusionment with the president and government would have been even greater than it ultimately turned out to be under Johnson.

Was the Kennedy assassination an historical proof-point? Was it the result of a vast conspiracy? Like Eisenhower with Lincoln, Oliver Stone throws ambiguity to the winds, answering both questions with an emphatic yes. His new, much discussed JFK is a cartoon that insists that Kennedy, if he lived, would have robbed the U.S. military and corporate establishment of the Vietnam war for which, in Stone's view, it was paying and that its leaders killed him to prevent it.

The historical distortions begin even before the film appears on the screen. Stone opens his film with an excerpt from Eisenhower's famous 1961 farewell warning against the "acquisition of unwarranted influence" by the "military-industrial complex." Although Stone would have us believe that he was precariously cautioning us against a Pentagon-led coup d'état, he was actually warning Americans to resist the demands for a mammoth defense buildup made during the 1960 campaign by none other than John Kennedy!

Throughout the film, Stone harps on Kennedy's quarrels with the CIA and the Pentagon, vastly inflating the importance of a fall 1963 memo ordering withdrawal of a thousand troops from Vietnam. He omits the ample evidence we have of Kennedy's insistence on preserving his anti-communist credentials, his belief that the communist tide had to be resisted in Southeast Asia and that Vietnam was the best place to do it. His buildup since 1945 or of more covert action than any president since the CIA was founded.

Similarly, Stone exaggerates the case that Kennedy might have been killed by members of his own government, relying on the power and emotion of the cinema to clinch the argument that logical discourse

and the available evidence cannot. For all Stone's professions of high moral purpose and respect for the late president, the filmmaker has a curiously glibish sensibility. The camera lingers on actual bootlegged photographs of Kennedy's autopsy. Stone's special effects people have recreated the corpse so that it can be probed onscreen in the same fashion as those Mexican tabloids that thrill their readers with color pictures of mangled bodies after automobile wrecks.

The film suggests that Stone and other of the most dogged conspiracy theorists have forged a tacit, perhaps unwitting alliance with Kennedy's most zealous partisans. The greatest obstacle Kennedy's champions have encountered in trying to seize for him a large place in history has been the fact that he represented no lasting social or political movement, as Franklin Roosevelt and Martin Luther King did.

As Garry Willis has observed, King required no airports or highways or cultural centers to be named for him because his work and ideas lived on, which was not true of the cool, dispassionate Kennedy, who so diffused movements and ideology. Some of Kennedy's partisans thus moved quickly to see his death as the result of his health. It was in this spirit that, immediately after the assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy said she hoped that at least her husband had been killed for civil rights. (Informant that the assassin was a "tiny communist," she replied that this robbed her husband's death of its meaning.)

The conspiracy theorists have an equal stake in finding meaning in Kennedy's death. Otherwise, they would have spent much time and energy investigating a crime that made little difference. Distorting the existing evidence to make Kennedy a grand anti-militarist who would have kept America out of Vietnam and reduced the power of the U.S. military-intelligence apparatus is one remedy to this problem. It also gives Stone and others who share his political views a stick with which to beat the Pentagon and the CIA.

There is every reason to keep examining Kennedy's record as president and discover new truths about his murder, but not for partisan titillation or pamphleteering. Historians and amateur students of history must remember that some historical issues are never answered beyond the shadow of a doubt. In no case might that prove more true than the question of why John Kennedy died and where this country would have headed had he lived.